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ABSTRACT

This study sought to determine Australian attitudes toward men working in the early childhood profession. Subjects were 100 first-year and 100 third-year female early childhood undergraduates and 22 practicing early childhood teachers and caregivers. Survey respondents were asked to describe how three imaginary early childhood teachers named Mary, Steve, and Chris would respond to everyday classroom situations. The open-ended responses indicated that about half of the first- and third-year students thought that the three teachers would react in the same way. The other half thought that whereas Mary would engage in more physical contact with children, Steve would refrain from touching them. Responses for Chris's behavior were largely dependent on the perception of this imaginary teacher's gender. The teachers' and caregivers' responses, while more sophisticated, were similar in terms of the expectations for the three teachers. The survey also found that while most respondents believed that male and female early childhood teachers entered the profession for the same reasons, many thought that male teachers would move on to other careers, whereas female teachers would remain in the profession. A copy of the survey questionnaire is appended. (MDM)

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ED 370 711

MEN IN EARLY CHILDHOOD - WHAT DO WOMEN THINK ABOUT IT?

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Abstract:

The early childhood field in Australia has been slow to accept that, for a number of reasons, males are perceived to have a role in children's services, even with the very youngest children in child care. This attitude seems to prevail in spite of a general "freeing up" of attitudes relating to more androgynous roles for workers in the wide community. This anti-male attitude is in direct contradiction to a basic early childhood tenet, namely that young children should be helped to recognise stereotypes and caricatures of people in their everyday world, in vicarious situations including books, toys, television and video programs and to understand that bias is not a productive activity.

As early childhood workers in child care centres and preschools constitute a learning model for young children, it follows that these adults need to exhibit unbiased attitudes towards people with whom they are in contact in their centres, including fellow workers. This study looked at the attitudes of female undergraduate early childhood students towards male workers at the beginning and end of their course.

Introduction:

The concept of males in early childhood settings and the lack of male workers in children's services in Australia seems to point up an area of traditional conservatism in early childhood services. While there is a disconcerting lack of interest or positive speculation on this position in Australia, it would be true to say that in other countries, including the United States and England, there has been an increasing interest in, and awareness of, the need for a more equitable balance between males and females in early childhood settings, just as males have been encouraged to join other previously female-dominated professions including social work and nursing.

Over a long period of time, parents, teachers and psychologists have made frequent and intense demands for more male teachers at the early childhood level, that is in the areas of child care, preschool, kindergarten and the first few grades of the primary school (Gold and Reis, 1978). In fact, Bailey (1983) has suggested that male involvement in early childhood programs is not a product of contemporary thinking and values. He asserts that Frederick Froebel, the father of the kindergarten movement, had all-male staff for his original kindergarten in 1837 and that women were only admitted to the fold after Froebel's own marriage! While we can speculate about the reasons for Froebel's change of attitude, the fact remains that for the last century or so, early childhood education has been perceived as primarily the domain of women. This assertion was reinforced by instructions and directions which were issued at various times. It is not so long ago that males were prohibited in the USA from teaching at the early school grades. This quote sums up the position in 1947:

> "Men should not be asked to play nursemaid to young children ... it should be made the policy of the school system to place men only in the upper grades in their chosen subject fields so that such work will come to be characterised as

the work for men. Women should appear as out of place in such assignments as men are now in the lower elementary grades."

(Kaplan, in Robinson, 1981:29)

The thinking that men did not belong in the early childhood field prevailed in the 1950s and is epitomised in the following quote :

"One could hardly imagine a situation in which a man would be in his element teaching a class of kindergarteners. He would immediately become suspect."

(Robinson, 1981:27)

This curious debate apparently assumed a different direction in America in the 1960s and 1970s, in that a reason was sought for permitting men to work with young children because of the positive contribution males could make to the profession. As a result, two schools of argument have emerged to support the inclusion of males in the early childhood field. One, known as the traditionalists, wants to reinforce traditional sex-role norms, the other labelled not surprisingly as the nontraditionalists, base their argument on the need to loosen and change the traditional sex-role norms.

The traditionalists, who predominated in the 1960s and early 1970s, expressed a concern that the female-dominated early childhood years would result in 'feminised' boys. Numerous assertions have been made relating to the male's positive role in the early childhood developmental process. These include preventing children from perceiving school as a female-dominated institution, improving school performance and classroom atmosphere for boys, acting as a counter-balance for 'urbanisation' and 'family disintegration problems', providing masculine role models for boys, preventing juvenile delinquency and finally, changing the image of the early

childhood profession itself.

However, research which has been undertaken to support these assertions does not shed any real light on the topic, mainly because the subjects have been too few, the variables too many and most research lacked a clear theoretical basis of child behaviour and gender identification and development (Gold et al, 1977) .

> "Arguments and research in this area have not attempted to fit into a theoretical context, relying mainly instead on common sense, an alluring but sometimes untrustworthy guide."
>
> (Gold and Reis, 1978:4)

Despite lack of evidence to support the presence of males in early childhood on the basis of positive development of gender concepts or attitudes towards self, school and life, the 1980s brought a new argument for men to play a significant role in early childhood services, namely that young children will learn that men can be nurturing, loving and understanding - just as women are perceived to be (Riley et al, 1985). This androgynous approach, adopted by the nontraditionalists of the last decade, provides the most professionally viable reason for encouraging men to work with young children. The blending of both conventional masculine and feminine traits into one personality, encapsulated in the androgynous concept, seems to offer the young child a balanced program because an androgynous adult has the psychological freedom to engage in whatever behaviour seems most effective at the time.

> "The males' special contribution would consist not in 'acting like a man' for children, but in disproving the idea that men need act in some special 'manly' way." (Seifert, 1974:171)

Not withstanding this, men and women will behave differently with young children. Men, by their own preferences, may choose more messy experiences, more 'rough housing', more activities with trucks, more physical interactions than do many women, but they would still be fulfilling their role of providing a variety of ways of meeting the young child's social, emotional, cognitive and physical needs (Robinson, et al, 1980). this androgynous balance should permit all early childhood educators to perform their role more comfortably and possibly more competently. It follows then, that although we cannot put every young boy in a male teacher's or caregiver's learning environment, we should be encouraging involvement of male teachers and caregivers in early childhood education, until a more equitable balance prevails.

First, we need to examine the reasons why men would want to work with young children in a predominantly caring situation in which the majority of their working colleagues would be women. Seifert (1974) has suggested that other staff may perceive the male as entering the early childhood profession for the 'wrong' reasons, such as promotion and idealism. This is not difficult to believe as evidence from the field of nursing supports this view. In recent times male nurses have run the gauntlet of suspicious and threatened people in a predominantly female occupation. The problem however is deeper than mere superficial assertion because such attitudes could interfere with the potential effectiveness of both male and female early childhood workers.

Seifert (1974) has attempted to gauge the attitudes or practising early childhood (female) personnel to the concept of men entering the early childhood field. His results indicated that the respondents operate on the premise that women, more than men, choose the early childhood profession to facilitate the co-ordination of work and family life; that men do not require such good rapport with their colleagues; that men are more successful in preschool or the lower primary school grades if they keep moving around (at the expense of concern for the children is the usual

unwritten implication of this premise); and finally that men, more than women, need a 'love of children' to ensure their success. In other words men have to like children more or, for them, the early childhood would not be worth the hassle! The most insulting comment was that, in the main, early childhood professionals do not expect men to interact sensitively or skilfully with either children or colleagues!

Masterson's (1992) report of the results of an early survey he had undertaken makes interesting reading; results from the two hundred and twenty-two centres in Ohio which responded to his survey indicated that directors believed women "have a natural ability to nurture children and that men failed to have this instinct" (Masterson, 1992:31) and these directors indicated that they would be more likely to hire an untrained women than an untrained man.

Masterson summed up the current position succinctly:

> "Whether or not female directors are aware of the negative bias against male early childhood teachers, the survey results suggest they may in fact hold such attitudes. This could be one of the biggest factors why men find it harder to enter our profession."
>
> (Masterson, 1992:32)

Unfortunately research undertaken by Clyde (1989) and Clyde and Rodd (1989) provide similar paradoxical evidence in the early childhood field in Australia. In a survey on ethical concerns of one hundred and seven Victorian early childhood workers (both child care and kindergarten workers), a majority of female workers (57.1%) indicated that they were presently, or had in the past, worked with a male early childhood worker. While only four males responded to the survey, it appears that a greater number of males may be working in the early childhood field, particularly in child care, where 54.0% of the staff indicated they had worked with a

male compared to 27.4% of kindergarten/preschool teachers. One of the possible concerns listed in the survey was 'sharing the nurturing role with the male early childhood workers'. The Australian respondents ranked this issue as the last among the other issues, with only 6.7% reporting that it was of some concern, compared to 70.6% of respondents who indicated that it was of little or no concern as an ethical issue. In fact, 90.8% of the respondents indicated that males should be encouraged to work in the early childhood field. Males were seen as making a special contribution to the field because males provided a role model for children of female sole parents (21.6%), and have a different outlook on life compared with females (14.4%), while male strength, character and personality act as a balance and challenge to the female stereotyping of the nurturing and caregiving role in early childhood services.

The respondents presented the following explanations for the limited number of male workers in the early childhood years; lack of public acceptance (15.2%); lack of pay and promotional opportunities (8.8%); the stigma of male involvement in child abuse (7.2%) and conflict over the 'naturalness' of males performing basic care tasks (7.2%). These concerns were raised by a limited number of respondents when compared to the overwhelming positive attitude (90.8%) towards male involvement in the field.

In spite of the fact that the Australian responses to male colleagues were positive this may not in fact be the case, given the overseas research and the limited sample. The author determined to develop a protocol to find answers to the following questions:

* Are female undergraduate students biased in their attitudes towards male early childhood workers when they enter their course?

* Do potential preschool teachers and child care workers have the same perceptions regarding male colleagues?

* Can the undergraduate program assist female students to alter their attitudes to male early childhood workers?

* What are the attitudes of practising early childhood professionals to male colleagues?

Research Design:

A questionnaire was devised consisting of two parts. Part 1 outlined five normal scenarios in an early childhood setting, namely :

1. the teacher/caregiver is working with children in an outdoor area and notices a child crying;

2. some of the children are engaged in building an obstacle course and a few are busy in the digging patch;

3. a child is resting quietly in the book corner but obviously would benefit from sitting on an adult's lap looking at a book;

4. John and Pamela are working independently at the carpentry bench. Pamela seems to need some assistance with holding the nails, but John is managing well; and

5. the parents are bringing the children into the centre at the beginning of the session and expect to be greeted by the teacher/caregiver.

Respondents were asked to describe how the female "Mary", male "Steve" and androgynous "Chris" would respond in each situation.

Part B was adapted from Seifert (1974); respondents were asked to rank seven qualities needed by early childhood workers in the order in which Mary, Steve and Chris would see them as necessary to succeed, problems to be faced by Mary, Steve and Chris, reasons for becoming teachers or caregivers and finally how long they thought Mary, Steve and Chris would work in a centre, or in a new job related to young children.

Methodology:

The subjects were one hundred female undergraduate students in the first year of an early childhood course, one hundred third year students in the final year of the same course and twenty-two practising early childhood teachers and caregivers. The poor response from workers in the field (over three hundred surveys were sent) may have been due to a lack of interest in the topic, overwork in the centre or a reluctance to undertake more paperwork.

Findings:

About half the first and third year students indicated that they believed that 'Mary' 'Steve' and 'Chris' would react to each situation in the same way, but the remaining fifty percent of the respondents suggested that Mary would place the child on her lap whereas Steve would sit "next to the child", while Chris would ask the child to "join the rest of the children and learn together", or "do what Mary would do; perhaps because he's a male he might ask aloud what the child was crying for first because women tend to touch more quickly than men", or ask another child to comfort a crying child. There were many similar examples of the androgynous Chris seeking

the support of other children to meet their peers' needs, whereas Steve would assist, direct and tell children at the woodwork bench and digging areas and Mary would use language to explain or describe and be most likely to hug, put the child on her lap, or touch the child's shoulder.

Clearly the first and final year early childhood students had well conceived ideas of the way in which male and female early childhood workers would react to identical situations, and while the purists may not have necessarily agreed with the actual responses, they were consistent across the beginning and exiting cohorts of students. Mary would touch, encourage, support and sustain, Steve would ask, tell, demonstrate and stand close by, while Chris, depending upon his/her perceived sex, would operate more like Steve or Mary, and in addition she/he would urge the child's peers to assist.

The responses of the teachers and caregivers, while more sophisticated (the caregivers had an average of 9½ years' experience and the teachers' 12 years experience), were very similar in terms of the expectations for Mary, Steve and Chris. Mary would "rush up", comfort, cuddle, offer support, try to raise self esteem whereas Steve would observe, check the physical safety and well being of each child and then as a last resort, offer advice. Chris was clearly perceived as female by two teachers and male by two caregivers and the responses reflected this : "he would hold things for the children building the obstacle course" or "she would actively assist at the digging patch".

One interesting point did arise; it is clear from the responses that caregivers are more experienced at working with male colleagues than are preschool teachers. Three caregivers offered somewhat vitriolic ideas about "Chris'" possible response, namely, "He (Chris) is getting a bit bored sitting in the digging patch", "Chris is not responding - he is thinking of raging tonight", and "Chris (won't do anything for the

child in the book corner), he doesn't like reading books to children".

Part B of the questionnaire yielded predictable results in that while the majority of students suggested that all three workers have the same main reason for choosing to be an early childhood worker, usually a desire to work with young children, there was a significant difference in their perceptions of the amount of time males and females would spend in the field; females would spend "more than five years" (the final choice), whereas males would spend between one and two years or two and five years in the early childhood field. Clearly these students perceived males as transient workers in the early childhood field.

The practising early childhood workers indicated that the main quality Mary would need would be "a love of children", but for Steve several of the child care workers indicated that a love of children would need to be supported by "a willingness to discuss professional problems with colleagues". Clearly the practising caregivers had either experienced working with males or perceived the potential problems a male may have in the early childhood field.

The major problem faced by Mary, Steve and Christ would be "a lack of opportunity to discuss teaching problems with colleagues" as ascertained by both caregivers and teachers. Obviously the rigours of the job outweigh any problems related to sex. However, several caregivers recorded that Steve (2) and Chris (3) would be concerned about earning a living, whereas this was not a problem for Mary.

Both teachers and caregivers believed that all three subjects chose a job in early childhood because they wanted to work with young children, although one kindergarten response suggested Steve desired a "secure and responsible job" whereas two child care respondents gave this as the reason for Chris' attraction to early childhood.

In terms of the length of time Mary would spend in the centre, most teachers thought longer than five years, whereas caregivers believed 2-5 years was more realistic. This probably reflects the average length of time workers spend in preschools and child care centres respectively. Steve would spend about 2-5 years in the centre, whereas Chris' length of stay varied on whether she/he was perceived as male or female or worked in preschool or child care.

The final question relating to the length of time Mary, Steve or Chris might spend in a new job varied also; Mary would stay longer than either Steve or Chris in a job, irrespective of whether it was a caregiver or teacher responding. The following gratuitous comment from a teacher sums up the situation :

> "One does not find many males working in child care/kindergarten situations. To my way of thinking I don't think Chris or Steve would look for long-term jobs in this field. I find it hard to judge the responses regarding job aspirations".

Implications:

This kind of response reinforces the work of Seifert (1974) in his American study and highlights the potential anomalies in the early childhood field; men are welcome to work in the field, colleagues who like working with them do so for traditional, rather than contemporary reasons; they expect males to behave differently from females in their handling of day to day situations in the centre and they are sure that males do not see early childhood as a long term career, as is the case with females.

Early childhood is a profession which prides itself on demonstrating a high level of interpersonal skills and establishing a caring, supportive environment for all the

participants. If this is the case, it may be possible for males and females to accept the commitment and capacities of their colleagues of both sexes to providing a supportive, nurturing environment for the young child. Hopefully this androgynous concept of the work of both female and male workers will become the dominant characteristic of the good early childhood worker of the next century.

However the somewhat fixed attitudes towards males and male behaviour exhibited by both entering and exiting tertiary students does not bode well for the field; obviously it is very difficult to try to change entrenched positions held by young adults who are exposed to judgemental behaviour when working with practitioners in the field whose modelling behaviour probably reflects that of the twenty-two in-field respondents. However, there was one respondent who made a plea for males in the field; when responding to the question : How long will Steve actually work in a centre, responded :

> "Not sure on this! I believe males are discriminated against in child care unfortunately. So we need more males in the profession".

Importance of the Study:

While the study needs to be replicated in other states and territories of Australia, it indicates a bias by incumbent female early childhood workers against potential male colleagues. It can be argued that the respondents' belief that males would react differently from females is not in itself negative, but the implication was that "atypical" behaviour was not appropriate. As both female undergraduates in training and qualified staff hold similar views, it indicates that it will be difficult to eradicate this particular bias without an overt, active advocacy process, if young children in Australia can have the opportunity to be nurtured by male as well as female professionals.

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APPENDIX

You are just beginning your pre-service course at the School of Early Childhood Studies, University of Melbourne. You are understandably excited and probably somewhat apprehensive about your role as an early childhood worker. This survey is meant to ascertain the way you think some mythical colleagues of yours might react to typical experiences in an early childhood setting.

Your mythical colleagues are named Mary, Steve and Chris. Now read on:

1. The caregiver is working with children in the outdoor area and notices a child crying:

1.1 What would Mary do? Why?
.....
.....
.....

1.2 What would Steve do? Why?
.....
.....
.....

1.3 What would Chris do? Why?
.....
.....
.....

2. Some of the children are engaged in building an obstacle course and a few are busy in the digging patch

2.1 What would Mary do? Why?
.....
.....
.....

2.2 What would Steve do? Why?
.....
.....
.....

2.3 What would Chris do? Why?
.....
.....
.....

3. A child is resting quietly in the book corner but obviously would benefit from sitting on an adult's lap looking at a book:

3.1 What would Mary do? Why?
.....
.....
.....

3.2 What would Steve do? Why?
.....
.....
.....

3.3 What would Chris do? Why?
.....
.....
.....

4. John and Pamela are working independently at the carpentry bench. Pamela seems to need some assistance with holding the nails, but John is managing well.

4.1 What would Mary do? Why?
.....
.....
.....

4.2 What would Steve do? Why?
.....
.....
.....

4.3 What would Chris do? Why?
.....
.....
.....

5. The parents are bringing the children into the centre at the beginning of the

session and expect to be greeted by the caregiver:

5.1 How would Mary handle this situation? Why?
.....
.....
.....

5.2 How would Steve handle this situation? Why?
.....
.....
.....

5.3 How would Chris handle this situation? Why?
.....
.....
.....

Part II

Rank the responses to the first three questions from 1 to 7: 1 being the 'most important' and 7 being the 'least important'. Put a number in every box.

1. Which quality will Mary need most in order to be successful in working with young children?

- ☐ a desire to earn her own living?
- ☐ a love of children?
- ☐ a desire to change the centre?
- ☐ a sense of humour?
- ☐ a willingness to discuss professional problems with colleagues?
- ☐ a friendly rapport with colleagues?
- ☐ an ability to set limits for the children in the group?

2. What will be the most important problem that Mary will face in working with young children?
(rank from 1 to 4; 1 is the most important)

- ☐ a tendency to set too few limits on the children?
- ☐ a concern for earning a living?
- ☐ a lack of opportunity to discuss teaching problems with colleagues?
- ☐ a lack of support with colleagues?

3. Why do you think Mary chose to work with young children?
(rank from 1 to 5; 1 is the most important)

- ☐ a desire to work with young children?
- ☐ a secure and responsible job?
- ☐ couldn't think of anything else to do?
- ☐ wanted a job that could be easily co-ordinated with family resonsibility'
- ☐ an inability to succeed at other kinds of work?

4. How long do you think Mary will actually work in a centre?
(tick one box only)

- ☐ 0-1 year
- ☐ 1-2 years
- ☐ 2-5 years
- ☐ more than 5 years

5. If Mary leaves the centre but keeps working with young children in so
other way, how long do you think Mary will work at the new job?
(tick one box only)

- ☐ 0-1 year
- ☐ 1-2 years
- ☐ 2-5 years
- ☐ more than 5 years

N.B. Same questions for "Steve" and "Chris".

The caregiver is working with children in the outdoor area and notices a child crying:

Some of the children are engaged in building an obstacle course and a few are busy in the digging patch:

A child is resting quietly in the book corner but obviously would benefit from sitting on an adult's lap looking at a book.

John and Pamela are working independently at the carpentry bench. Pamela seems to need some assistance with holding the nails, but John is managing well.

The parents are bringing the children into the centre at the beginning of the session and expect to be greeted by the caregiver.

PART B

Rank the responses to the first three questions from 1 to 7; 1 being the "most important" and 7 being the "least important". Put a number in every box.

1. Which quality will Mary need most in order to be successful in working with young children?

- ☐ a desire to earn her own living?
- ☐ a love of children?
- ☐ a desire to change the centre?
- ☐ a sense of humour?
- ☐ a willingness to discuss professional problems with colleagues?
- ☐ a friendly rapport with colleagues?
- ☐ an ability to set limits for the children in the group?

2. What will be the most important problem that Mary will face in working with young children?

(rank from 1 to ; 1 is the most important)

- ☐ a tendency to set too few limits on the children?
- ☐ a concern for earning a living?
- ☐ a lack of opportunity to discuss teaching problems with colleagues?
- ☐ a lack of support with colleagues?

3. Why do you think Mary chose to work with young children?

(rank from 1 to 5; 1 is the most important)

[1] a desire to work with young children?

[2] a secure and responsible job?

[4] couldn't think of anything else to do?

[3] wanted a job that could be easily co-ordinated with family responsibility?

[5] an inability to succeed at other kinds of work?

4. How long do you think Mary will actually work in a centre?

(tick one box only)

☐ 0-1 year

☐ 1-2 years

☐ 2-5 years

☑ more than 5 years

5. If Mary leaves the Centre but keeps working with young children in some other way, how long do you think Mary will work at the new job?

(tick one box only)

☐ 0-1 year

☐ 1-2 years

☑ 2-5 years

☐ more than 5 years